

Chinese Intransigence: Catalyst for Change in Indian Policies

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Since April 2020, a myriad of ‘whys and wherefores’ on China’s premeditated aggression around its periphery and against India in Eastern Ladakh, have been analysed *ad infinitum*. Inconclusive debates on China’s belligerence against its neighbouring countries have called it a pursuit of its geo-political ambitions by adopting expansionist designs. Wherein, mainly against India, China’s adventurism is argued on the grounds of abrogation of Article 370; infrastructure construction along the Line of Actual Control (LAC); New Delhi’s stringent opposition to the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP); growing linkages with the United States (US), and more specifically, the Indo-Pacific activism under Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). Suffice it to say, having deemed to have ‘risen,’ China is stirring tense geopolitical confrontations that, undeniably, demonstrates Beijing’s hegemonic aspirations.

What calls for such a Chinese attitude? It can be rightly argued that China is seeking a global leadership, with an aim to set ‘right’ the perceived ‘wrongs’ of its own history—as exemplified by its ‘national rejuvenation’ campaign under the policy of ‘Chinese Dream.’ Besides, Beijing’s growing

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power index is manifested in its rising profiles as the second largest world economy with a nominal GDP (largest in PPP terms) and the world's largest military¹ with a burgeoning Military-Industrial Complex. China's military might is complimented by the rapid modernisation of the People's Liberation Army in terms of weapons, equipment, technologies and massive structural and doctrinal orientation. This is justified by China's increased defence budget, which is second only to the US.

China's BRI has boosted its global presence by means of infrastructural projects in over 70 countries. Being the world's largest exporting nation, BRI aims to connect China's extensive manufacturing hubs, to be better served by global value chains in endeavouring to alter the way world does business. Through BRI, China plans to guarantee higher economic prosperity and increasing per capita income to lower internal anxieties, thus strengthening control and legitimacy of the Communist Party of China (CPC).

But all is indeed not hunky dory! Despite the economies of scale, China is overwhelmed by its geography with grave limitations of the first Island Chain and is attempting to open land corridors through Myanmar, Pakistan and Central Asia. The serious global economic downturn and the COVID-19 pandemic will cause a rethink in BRI partner nations on reprioritising health infrastructure. Notwithstanding the benefits of infrastructural development under BRI, the recipient nations also exhibit anxiety over debt burden as well as limited employment avenues, as much of the workforce is Chinese.

What adds further is that despite deep pockets and apparent infrastructure growth, China has not succeeded in building its soft power influence. As noted, in 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that, "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative and better communicate China's messages to the world."² Chinese attempted to enhance its soft power by promoting 'ancient wisdom' through Confucius Institutes, and now through BRI. However, on the contrary, China's authoritarian system mainly in exercising control

over Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong negates its ‘soft image.’ More notably, in the South China Sea, where having promised earlier of no design to militarise it, China rescinded it and went ahead to do exactly that. In due process, China has not been able to universalise its culture at a popular level, or sell a lifestyle to the world, or commence engagement with other cultures. By all measures, China has failed to retain a more palatable image in the popular global culture as soft power is emblematic of culture, political values, and foreign policies with moral authority. Besides, China’s increasing ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’ against the global resentment towards Beijing on COVID-19 has further deteriorated China’s ‘image’.

The other aspect to note is the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), which despite its rapid modernisation is yet experimenting. What adds to this is the fact that while the PLA is conducting a large number of military exercises, both bilaterally and trilaterally, it cannot compensate for realistic experience in actual combat. This calls for serious shortcomings in both war fighting as well as in PLA’s command. Inevitably, this will cast a shadow on the PLA’s ability to take on a modern peer competitor, and hence the reliance upon surreptitious operations short of war. As stated that despite the technological advances and growing military might, PLA is “infected by the peace disease (*héping bìng*), peacetime habits (*héping jìxí*) and peace problems (*héping jībì*), as it has not participated in any war since 1979.”³ Besides, corruption is also endemic to the PLA adding to the ‘peace infection’. Apart from the PLA, China’s stability is plagued by its internal tensions in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong; increasing corporate debt that amounts to an exorbitant 300 per cent of GDP, heavy dependence on fuel imports and others. To add, COVID-19’s disruption of the global supply chains have raised the Chinese anxiety given foreign firms plan to shift production outside of China, which will result into weakening of the Chinese economy.

In view of this, pragmatism is imperative in analysing China of the future, which indicates a bipolar world, accompanied by concerns over

globalisation and most importantly, the equation between China and the US in the post-pandemic world. While China is deemed to become a superpower, likely with the highest nominal GDP, and tying down a large number of countries to its coattails under BRI. It is to note that there are less chances that China will ever abandon BRI for more than economy, it shoulders the geopolitical ambitions of Pax Sinica—the plan for global domination and leadership. In Xi’s view, it is a “once-in-a-century change” sweeping China and the world, wherein Pax Sinica simply does not hold an inclusive view of the world.

In this case, China’s belligerence against its neighbours with inimical and adverse posturing may become a norm. As noted, in May 2020, at the 13th National People’s Congress, Xi emphasised on the pandemic’s “profound impact on the global landscape and on China’s security and development as well” calling on the PLA to “think about worst-case scenarios,” to improve its combat-preparedness, and be equipped to “deal with various complex situations in a timely and effective manner.”⁴ With such intentions, China will certainly opt for hard power to coerce its neighbours, especially to better harness and cement its own position. And in doing so, often China might overreach, and will be forced to eat a humble pie!

This then brings into perspective the need to analyse the tensed India-China relations in 2020, especially against stand-off in Eastern Ladakh. Over the past few decades, India had attempted to explore, and create huge interest in relationship building and engagement building on economic interdependence and negating the likelihood of a conflict. For instance, given the burgeoning trade at a threshold of US\$ 100 billion and a significant politico-diplomatic engagement, India’s China policy was that of conciliation and restraint. However, China disallowed any forward movement on reconciliation of the borders. This further clarifies the fact that despite the growing economic interdependence, the boundary question between India and China continues to remain ‘exceptional and

overpowering.’ To which, India’s emergence as a geopolitical competitor, further adds to Beijing’s political antagonism towards New Delhi.

The belligerence and aggression shown by China in 2020 has effectively clarified that the basis of its relationship with India will continue to remain anarchic. Apparently, China has no inhibitions about exercising hard power when dealing with India, to secure its desired nationalistic goals. In contemplating its future relationship with China, India needs to take account that there are no compunctions in jettisoning norms of poise, decency and responsibility—which the superpower status ought to bring with it. In this regard, four directional pointers need mentioning.

First, the past agreements, and politico-diplomatic relationship-building are no barometer for future rapprochement. Rather on the contrary, these might lead to misconceptions and complacency that may cause an impairment, economically or security-wise. As shared space of growth is not acceptable to China, strategic fundamental overhaul of policies is imperative. Soft-peddalling the ‘China threat,’ by adhering to a cautious and restraint approach will only be counter-productive. There ought to be clarity and transparency in approach to benefit all.

Second, India’s larger concept of strategic autonomy, in the light of an inimical neighbourly superpower, needs reconsideration. It may be felt that in phraseology, strategic autonomy can be redefined or broad based; however, the terminology with its historical linkages may be conversely comprehended both globally and internally, cannot be ignored. Strategies need to be varied circumstantially; wherein, the amended paradigm calls for a conceptual transformation in both foreign policy decision-making and in protection of strategic interests. In view of this, forging of strategic partnerships, deep strategic cooperation, economic and technological ties, both bilaterally and multilaterally are hence imperative. For there exists a powerful motivation for coordination to balance the inimical adversary.

Third, India's national security is at crossroads with tough and conflicting strategic choices, which lay down contradictory pathways towards differing outcomes. It has been often repeated that India's tensions with China is for the long haul. While, past examples and events and their handling or outcomes thereof, have limited correlation with that of the 2020 stand-off, but the current tensions have accelerated the need to devise strategic choices for the long haul. The requisite lies in adopting a methodology to reach end state or outcomes in timelines, and effective planning to handle the interregnum. What further adds to this necessity is the fact that warfare itself is in a mode of transition. This makes it an optimal necessity to examine prosecution of warfare in all its manifestations.

Fourth, more importantly, there is severe stress on India's national economy, largely due to the pandemic. While this is a separate issue, but an all important one, for without a buoyant economy, there will be harder decisions to be made. This makes credible multilateral coordination and the desire to better integrate with like-minded economies and supply chains, is the call of the day.

Arguably, China's intransigence and aggression of 2020 is a timely wake-up call, and an opportunity for India, one that mandates national consensus. It is a proverbial paradigm shift, for a nation with centuries of cultural moorings, and which has handled many a serious crisis. Hence, it is time for India to proceed single-mindedly to address the imperative transformation—thus, change is the need of the hour.

Notes

1. As per the 2020 Global Firepower Nations ranking, Chinese military is listed third in the order of ranking.
2. Quoted in Asit K.Biswas and Cecilia Tortajada (2018), "China's soft power is on the rise," *China Daily*, March 2, 2018. Available online at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201802/23/WS5a8f59a9a3106e7dcc13d7b8.html>, accessed on October 3, 2020.

3. Suyash Desai (2020), "The People's Liberation Army is strong. But it has four weaknesses," *Hindustan Times*, July 31, 2020. Available online at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/the-people-s-liberation-army-is-strong-but-it-has-four-weaknesses/story-4BAJhVDLbfKhq2XEczg2JK.html>, accessed on October 4, 2020.
4. Quoted in Kamo Tomoki (2020), "China's Leadership Girds Up for the Post-COVID Era," *Nippon.com*, August 24, 2020. Available online at <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00600/>, accessed on October 3, 2020.

